

Interview with

FORMER SECRETARY OF STATE DEAN ACHESON

20 October 1953

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17) 7-10, 20, 35, 42, 45-47

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in his office,
Union Trust Building
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Washington, D.C.

1. Regarding the early period, Joe Jones knows a lot. He is working now on a study of the Greek-Turkish period - up to the beginning of the Marshall Plan - a period of about fifteen weeks.

2. The whole matter begins with the misconception which everybody had regarding the nature and depth of the problem, after the war. No one had a picture of the completeness of the disruption that had occurred. The outlook was like that after World War I, which was wrong then and was wrong again after the second world war. This was true of both European and Asiatic countries.

3. In Europe there had been the breakup of economic and business connections of three-fourths of a continent. Hitler had done an extraordinary job of changing the whole direction of European economic life. He came close to doing what Napoleon couldn't do. He broke up the connections of many years.

4. Plans developed during and following the second world war, which looked good at the time, turned out not to be so. We operated on a theory of dealing with disease and unrest until one or two crops could come in. But the problems were more far-reaching.

5. One of the great mistakes was the stopping of lend-lease - on which Truman now agrees. Crowley showed bad judgment and Grew didn't understand the situation. They presented us with what purported to be an agreed position.

6. It grew upon us that the problem was much deeper and that we were heading for very bad trouble.

7. Quite early, toward the end of 1946, we began to get drawn into the Greek situation. We then realized increasingly that we were confronted with a mess of very great proportions. In Greece there were partisans, the communist Left, and British interests - with conflicts among the three. Greece had been declining for twenty years. People dealing with it were frightfully incompetent. The British Ambassador came to me and said that in 60 days they were going to have to pull out.

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8. Earlier there had been the Straits issue - and the Truman decision to give support to the Turks even at the risk of fighting. As we got into this it seemed that, from the political point of view, we were faced with a series of enveloping movements by Russia, in which the pressures were "very well devised." Any one of these movements were calculated to accomplish their purpose; in such a situation you do not have to rely on any one effort. Success in either Greece or Turkey would bring about the collapse of the other, then the whole ~~MARXIST COMMUNIST~~ east Mediterranean area. At the same time, there were two other enveloping movements centered in Italy and France, with efforts to gain political control in these countries. These also had the great merit that any one, if successful, carried success over all areas to the east.

9. Thus the Russians had any number of chances - with almost unlimited chances for success in each. This became clear as one studied it and lent great seriousness to the whole problem.

10. At any rate, we started with Greece and Turkey, then saw the need for a great deal of effort to the west too.

11. It was this danger which I tried to bring out in the Cleveland speech. (Joe Jones can give you the documents, etc.)

12. All measures then under way were coming to an end on June 30. We couldn't just go on with old plans. Something new and very large was needed.

13. Before talking about solutions, we had to bring out the problem. The Cleveland speech gave an opportunity to do this. The Delta Council provided a good forum - a progressive group bringing together some 10,000 people, ^{at} from Vicksburg to New Orleans, at Teachers College. The President was to speak, but when he was unable to do so, they asked me to come. They wanted an important speech, and I was willing for I thought that I had an important speech to make. Joe Jones and others worked with me on it.

14. I started in by considering the starkness of the situation - dealing with the dollar balance, and the fact that Europe had no means of dealing with it. The skiff was approaching the waterfall.

15. The speech was sent to the President, and nearly all concerned with our European relations, in the Cabinet, saw it. Then it was discussed in the Cabinet and had the personal approval of the President. I was anxious for this, for I wanted it to be an Administration speech and not just a statement by Acheson.

16. What I did was to state the problem and indicate that in some extraordinary way, there would have to be grant aid.

17. I remember Marshall and Vandenberg discussing this at Blair House. Vandenberg was upset by the speech - feeling that it was reckless in dealing with the money angle. The response was that this is not a kindergarten situation, that all hell was going to break loose. ^{DAM}

18. Then Cohen had put forward the same idea in another talk.

19. I then worked with Marshall during the period before his speech. Will Clayton had come back from Europe, where he had attended an ECE meeting, deeply disturbed. He brought out the fact that the town and country relationship was distorted and that this was leading to a decrease in agricultural production. Due to inflation, there was "Nothing in it" for the farmers to produce surpluses; there was nothing for them to buy; the cities, on the other hand, had nothing coming in, and prices were continuing to rise, etc. Clayton's report greatly impressed Marshall.

20. George Kennan was very instrumental in bringing out a fundamental idea - that it should not be an American plan, but an American underwriting of a European plan; and that the fact of producing such a plan would itself have an important effect in Europe. He pressed this view, and Marshall was very receptive.

21. As regards both Cleveland and Harvard speeches, the reaction in the U.S. came via the continent. It indicates the incompetence of the American press, and the tendency to categorize speeches. Marshall's was to be a commencement speech, and in commencement speeches you say certain expected things and therefore it could not be important. I had British press contacts and channels - contacts with the London Express, the Observer, and BBC. I explained to them what this was and got copies to them and they had the text transmitted to England long before it arrived through normal channels.

22. I heard later that Bevin was advised to make an inquiry to the State Department to find out whether Marshall really meant what had been said in the Harvard speech, but that Bevin, who was very shrewd, didn't want to take the chance and preferred to go on the assumption that the statement as made was fully intended.

23. An important question involved, in connection with the Marshall speech, was that of whether Europe was going to split into east and west. We felt that it was important that if a European division was to come, it would not be we who brought it about. (It appears that Acheson was referring, at this point, to the way in which, in the Marshall speech, all European countries were invited to participate, with no discrimination against Russia, etc.)

24. As regards the possibility of Russian participation, there was the fact that, if they did so, it would involve a divulging of information, on their side, which they would probably be reluctant to give.

25. I don't think that any of us foresaw the extraordinary stupidity of Russia in this situation. If they had come in, they could have gone far toward killing the whole program not so much by direct opposition as by endless questioning and argument over one point, then another, then another. I was told later about what actually happened at the meeting with Molotov. It seems that he has a bump on his forehead which swells when he is under emotional strain. The matter was being debated, and Molotov had raised relatively minor questions or objections at various points, when a telegram was handed to him. He turned pale and the bump on his forehead swelled. After that his attitude suddenly changed and he became much more harsh.

I believe that Molotov must have thought that the instruction sent to him from Moscow was stupid. In any case, the withdrawal of the Russians made operations much more simple.

26. Oliver Franks, with his extraordinary lucidity and drive, made a great contribution.

27. Regarding the recommendation for the Harriman Committee, you might see Nitze, who knows the background. The initial reaction from Europe gave us an indication that here was a case where we would really have to move fast. We discussed it in a preliminary way, then talked with Marshall.

28. The President set up a meeting for that evening in the Oval Room of the White House. Vandenberg was there and Rayburn and, I believe, Taft and others.

29. Question: I recall that someone, I believe it was General Marshall, gave Vandenberg credit for the initial idea of a committee along the lines of the Harriman Committee; is this your recollection?

Reply: Perhaps this was because Vandenberg brought it up at the meeting, but he didn't name the people, etc. There was only one change in the list that had been prepared when Vandenberg suggested LaFollette. (Check with Nitze on this sequence and Vandenberg's precise role in connection with the origin of the committee.)

30. I left the Department at the end of July and was out of the Government for about 18 months.

31. The Committee for the Marshall Plan did do one of the best jobs of the kind ever done, considering the complications. The only parallel that I can think of is the Breton Woods Conference in connection with which the League of Women Voters did an extraordinary job educating the public on the significance of the complicated financial questions involved.

32. When the Marshall Plan was about to be passed, Truman called for me and wanted me to head the new administration. I strongly advised against it, saying that I thought it would lead to resentment on the Hill. I urged consultation with Vandenberg, real consultation, and I thought that he would suggest Hoffman, and urged that if he did so the President agree. That's what happened, and the President told me that he wanted to fight for my appointment, but I urged him not to. Hoffman's appointment worked out well.

33. On the question of organization it was a fairly sterile debate. The question of a separate agency is quite meaningless apart from the facts of American political life at the time. It could be done either way. There was a reluctance to have the State Department run the operation. The Department was and is usually unpopular. It has no constituency in the sense that Agriculture and Commerce do. And it is traditionally considered to be "alien" and to be incompetent. Therefore if you wanted to do anything with a large output of money, the thing was to have an outside operation.

34. I believe the only valid point is when there is something novel, a new organization may be more vigorous and reckless. There is some merit then in ignorance and in the personnel brought in, and something gets done.

35. But the important things about organization are not those but the degree of culture and sense brought in in dealing with problems. I am convinced that abroad it leads only to trouble if things in each country are not under the ambassador; otherwise, there is utter confusion. People who are uninformed and very energetic get steamed up and tend to get the country confused. After a period of confusion, the cooperating government is likely to consider that it is not so bad, since they can play people and agencies of the U.S. Government off against each other. You get a brilliant man like Monnet going to some, then others, then others, till finally he can slip through what he wants.

36. In the U.S. the argument may be carried to extremes. We had the experience with ECA, the army, etc. But I have seen it in other departments where, for example, someone in Agriculture begins with the question of food and then everything seems to be related to the food question and the area which they feel they should control gets wider and wider and wider. The argument made by the Army, ECA, etc., is that we must have control of our own people. But this is an indication of maturity - as though we had separate governments, not one. We had all of this during the war with BEW, FEA, etc., leading to reports on disagreements in the field.

37. It was learned during the war that the man who controlled communications controlled a lot. The State Department still controlled communications, and the messages that went out and came in.

38. You don't find this kind of thing happening in the British Government. For example, when Halifax was here, all understood that the ambassador was a god and there was no thought of sidestepping him in any dealing here.

39. As to coordination in Washington, Truman did much. He determined not to make decisions affecting others without first hearing both sides. This was in contrast to Roosevelt, who responded to people presenting one point of view and made many decisions accordingly. Truman could be very severe with those who tried to get him to make decisions before he had heard all important views; he was harsh with any sort of backdoor approach. And this contributed to the reaching of agreement on policies at a high level.

40. You'll find that it comes down to the people at the top.

41. If there is not this kind of coordination, there can be in government an expanding of any pinpoint.

42. It is important in administration of our foreign affairs to see that we are concerned with what is happening in specific countries. We have therefore in each country a need for flexibility. Everything that we do there has an effect on the country, and what we want to see is the total effect. This depends on the key person on the spot. In the Voice of America, for example, things were more decentralized, but with broad direction from here. So it should be with aid. It is a mistake to try to run everything from here.

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43. There was an issue on this between Harriman and Bissell. Harriman complained that Bissell wanted to hold all of the control in Washington. But what Harriman wanted was to be given broad direction and then to operate within that kind of direction. That is, I think, a central point.

44. This tends to increase the trend of 175 years toward increasing Congressional control by the most meticulous control over appropriations. This is now growing as regards military aid, economic aid, etc. This is helped on by an agency which in operations tries to circumvent by "regulations" established controls.

45. This tends towards a building up of big organizations abroad. This was particularly harassing, for example, to the French - giving the impression that Americans were trying to run the French Government. I think it would have been better to have much looser relations, holding the French responsible for the results.

46. Another point. To get Congressional attention there has been a tendency to develop more and more extreme presentations. The Marshall Plan began by as a battle against hunger, poverty, desperation and chaos. But by stages, it became more and more directed against Communism. Of course, it was that, too, but the result has been to get the eye off the ball.

47. This leads to the introduction of trimmings such as the effort by Congress to deal with East-West trade.

48. It also goes a long way toward destroying, abroad, what might be considered the propaganda value of the whole effort.

HBP:lp
Nov. 16, 1953